POLITICS

The Children of Columbus

From violent conquest to common culture

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The novel was forbidden in the Spanish colonies by the Inquisition. The Inquisitors considered this literary genre as dangerous for the spiritual fate of the Indians as for the moral and political behavior of society, and in this, of course, they were absolutely right. We novelists must be grateful to the Spanish Inquisition for having discovered, before any critic did, the inevitably subversive nature of fiction. The prohibition included reading and publishing novels in the colonies. Naturally, there was no way to prevent a great number of novels from being smuggled into our countries and we know, for example, that the first copies of *Don Quixote* entered America hidden in barrels of wine. We can only dream with envy about the kind of experience it was, in those times, in Spanish America, to read a novel: a sinful adventure on account of which, by daring to abandon yourself to an imaginary world, you had to be prepared to face prison and humiliation.

Novels were not published in Spanish America until after the Wars of Independence. The first, *El Periquillo Sarniento*, appeared in Mexico only in 1816. Although novels were abolished for three centuries, the goal of the Inquisitors—a society exonerated from the fictional disease—was not achieved.

They did not realize that the realm of fiction was larger and deeper than that of the novel. Nor could they imagine that the appetite for lies—that is, for escaping objective reality through illusions—was so powerful and rooted in the human spirit, that, once the novel as a medium for satisfying that appetite was gone, the thirst for fiction would infect, like a plague, all the other disciplines and genres in which the written word could freely flow. In repressing and censoring the literary genre specifically invented to give "the necessity of lying" a place in the world, the Inquisitors achieved exactly the opposite of what they wanted. Theirs was a world without novels, yes, but also a world into which fiction had spread and contaminated practically everything: history, religion, poetry, science, art, speeches, journalism, and the daily habits of people.

We still are victims, in Latin America, of what we could call "the revenge of the novel." We still have great difficulty in our countries in differentiating between fiction and reality. We are traditionally accustomed to mix them in such a way that this is, probably, one of the reasons why we are so impractical and inept in political matters, for instance. But some good came also from this novelization of our whole life. Books such as Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Cortázar's short stories, and Roa Bastos's novels would not have been possible otherwise.

The tradition from which this kind of literature sprang, one in which we are exposed to a world totally subverted by fantasy, began, without doubt, with those chroniclers of the conquest and discovery that I read and glossed under the direction of that great historian of Spanish America, Raul Porras Barrenechea. Whenever Porras Barrenechea spoke, history became anecdote, gesture, adventure, color, psychology. He depicted history in a series of murals which had the magnificence of a Renaissance painting, and in which the determining factor of events was never impersonal

forces, the geographical imperative, economic relations, or divine providence—but rather the case of certain outstanding individuals whose audacity, genius, charisma, or contagious insanity had imposed on each era and society a certain orientation and shape.

I have been thinking a lot about Porras Barrenechea lately, particularly since 1992, which was, as you might remember, a commemorative year, the Quincentenary, which recalls a turning point in world history. Some would rather forget, but I think we ought to remember that just about 500 years ago Christopher Columbus's caravels first set sail and arrived on what would be called America, initiating waves of European and African immigrations. It is appropriate to reflect upon Columbus's voyage and its aftermath because just about everything good, and some of the bad, that has happened ever since has its roots in this episode. It shook up geography, economy, religion, morality, and the imagination of humanity; and it changed the course of history like probably nothing before it except, perhaps, the biblical flood.

Jorge Luis Borges once wrote regarding patriotism that "only affirmations are tolerated." Regarding the Quincentenary, it seems only contradictions were tolerated. A heated discussion preceded the Quincentenary, during which some rejected the idea of a commemoration wholesale, while others were willing to agree to it provided it served primarily to publicize the pillage committed by discoverers, conquistadors, and colonizers. The Quincentenary produced a curious controversy, with prosecutors of all shapes and sizes but few defenders.

Some of the harshest detractors have been Spaniards and Portuguese who have raised their angry voices to claim there is nothing to celebrate in the arrival of Columbus *to* America because it was an imperialistic enterprise. Catholic priests and theologians are the leading critics of what my school textbooks in the 1950s had called "the propagation of faith and the extirpation of idolatry by missionaries," a statement not even the most absent-minded conservative would dare to say in public today. All celebrations of the Quincentenary appear to have been burdened with hidden feelings of guilt and bad conscience.

This should not surprise us. Our age may be one of tremendous events, but it is also one of intellectual confusion. It is an age that has witnessed the collapse of the bloodiest regimes in history, and the eruption of liberty in societies where it never existed before, or where it was but a pale, elusive fire. But it has also witnessed the perversion of common sense and the assailment of values and reason by ideology. Ideology has become the lay religion of our time, and its dogmas, stereotypes, commonplaces, and excommunications continue to contaminate the intelligentsia of the Western world. The condemnations, the discomfort, and the silence of so many intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic concerning the Quincentenary can be explained by the fear of praising the moral or material achievements of our democracies, and thereby losing the "politically correct" credentials so necessary for success in the cultural establishment of the First and Third Worlds. The Second World, the Soviet Union and its satellites, failed and collapsed precisely because ideology had moved beyond the musings of individuals to become the reason of state. Prominent intellectuals continue to cast a shadow of doubt and skepticism on liberty and democracy, but this is an aberration. Liberty is nothing to be ashamed of. It ought to be cherished with the fervor of those who have lost it, or have just regained it. Like the young people of the former East Germany who in 1989 tore down the wall in Berlin, one of the tasks for men and women of the new generation is to tear down the ideological walls of the prison houses of thought and culture still prevalent in so many free nations.

The arrival of Europeans in those lands—let us say it without an inferiority or superiority complex, and without bringing in historical exorcisms—is the greatest event in the history of America, Europe, and I would dare say, the world. Modernity began with the odyssey of Columbus's three fragile and legendary boats and with the handful of adventurers who sailed through uncharted waters in search of a new route to India. They boggled the European mind

by stumbling into a fourth continent with highly developed civilizations. After 1492, the histories of many peoples scattered and isolated from each other in all corners of the world became one single, interconnected, and inseparable history. The slow, daunting, grandiose, and irreversible march of humanity towards universal civilization was set in motion.

There are many ways to broach a subject of such massive import. One can start at the beginning, like José de la Rada y Gamio, the fearless historian who began his biography of the poet Mariano Melgar with the Almighty's creation of the universe. He summarized the first seven days and continued chronologically with Adam and Eve, the earthly paradise, the apple, the serpent, and so on. By the time he got to the birth of his hero near the end of the 18th century, he was mentally and physically exhausted. I will not rehearse this method now, but will choose instead a less comprehensive and more personal one. I would like to look back on the events of 500 years ago from the perspective of my own experience, from my family history, or rather, from the history of my last name.

The name Vargas—my father's—arrived in South America with the first wave of Spaniards, those intrepid men led by the conquistador Francisco Pizarro who scaled the Andes and encountered the Inca civilization. The Vargases came from Extremadura, one of the poorest regions of Spain, and took their name, as was then customary, from the feudal lord of the region, on whose lands they worked as farm hands.

Humble and ignorant, many of them illiterate, but fierce as the times they were braving, they became protagonists in all the breathtaking events that characterized this adventurous and violent encounter of worlds and cultures. A Vargas was among the handful of conquistadors who set eyes on Atahualpa, the last emperor of the Incas, as he was drinking *chicha*, a corn-based liquor, from a skull. Rumor had it that it was the skull of his half-brother Huascar, whom he had executed in a bloody civil war. The next day, on the Plaza of Cajamarca, the conquistadors ambushed the Incas and dealt the fatal blow to the empire.

No sooner had the empire fallen than the conquistadors became involved in bitter and bloody conflicts. Many were killed in civil wars, others in uprisings. But many survived and spread throughout Peru and beyond. Centuries later, the name Vargas would become quite common. My paternal family is a stream from this vast network of rivers.

I was never particularly interested in the genealogy of my family, a large and sometimes unruly tribe. I was, however, quite interested in individuals and in none more than in Don Marcelino, my grandfather, for whom I felt uncontrollable affection. At home his name was taboo, and therefore a myth. He had been a faithful supporter of the liberal leader Augusto Duran, whom he accompanied in countless uprisings, guerrilla wars, imprisonments, and exiles. My grandmother had to work wonders to feed her five children. In his old age, the impulsive Marcelino crowned a life of irresponsibility when he fled his home with a native woman who wore traditional Indian dress. He finished his days with her, far away from us, as the master of a railway station in a remote post in the Andes.

Llosa, my mother's last name, made its way to America in the 17th century, about 100 years after my father's. Llosa was a military bureaucrat. He came from Santillana del Mar in Spain, a spotless little town in the mountains of the Bay of Biscay, and settled in a city in the south of Peru where I was born. He left many descendants who stuck stubbornly to the native soil: priests, nuns, judges, professors, poets, a few madmen, and a couple of military officers.

My grandparents knew every detail of the trials and tribulations of the Llosa family. It was a sheer delight to hear them tell so many tales and anecdotes during my childhood. I remember one story about a young officer, a hero of the war with Chile. And another about an inventor whose experiments caused floods, unintended demolitions of buildings,

and the bankruptcy of a company that took his inventions seriously. There was also one about a young woman who was going to enter a cloister when she met and fell in love with Dunquer Lavalle, a composer with whom she led a bohemian life which ended in tragedy.

But the anecdote that fired my imagination and kept me up at night is one I made my grandparents repeat over and over again. It was the story of a relative who told his wife and children he was stepping out for a moment before lunch to buy a newspaper in the arcades of the Plaza de Armas, the town center. They did not hear from him again for 25 years, when they received a letter from France announcing his death. "Why did he go to Paris?" I used to ask my grandmother. "Why else? To become corrupt!" That was, I believe, the origin of my fascination with French culture.

My story, I am sure, is not unusual. South Americans tend to have Spanish, Portuguese, or British ancestors. Many have ancestors stemming from more recent European migrations from Italy, France, Ireland, Germany, Central Europe, and elsewhere. For 500 years the Indians, the Europeans, and the Africans (who arrived in America with the Spanish conquistadors) have mixed to such an extent that most individuals have ancestors of different origins. I hope that this process, *mestizaje*, as we call it in Spanish, continues. Mestizaje has been faster in countries such as Paraguay and Mexico and slower in Peru and Bolivia. It has been extremely slow in the United States and Canada. But it has been taking place throughout the continent. In South America, it has been so systematic that all European families who have settled in America have some Indian or African background by the second or third generation. Mestizaje works both ways. It would probably be impossible to find "pure Indians," if it makes sense to use the expression at all, because one would need to search for them like a needle in a haystack in the roughest and most remote areas of the Andes, or in the jungles of Central and South America. They exist, but they are a very small minority.

One must understand mestizaje in a literal sense, of course, but it is also a psychological and a cultural fact. Let me illustrate the point with an example. There is a way of being Spanish, open and direct, which any Peruvian or Mexican would find disturbing, even offensive. Where a Spaniard may say "no" we are likely to say "yes…but." We speak in diminutives to dilute conviction. When we express ourselves, we take for granted that the best way to get from point A to point B is not a direct line, but a curve, or better yet, a spiral. We believe we are being thoughtless or impolite when we do not color our statements with doubts, when we do not express ourselves with a measure of restraint. Whether we are Indian, white, black, mulatto, or *mestizo*, when we Peruvians or Mexicans speak, we are enacting the rituals, the scrupulous and indirect forms of interaction of the Incas, Aztecs, and other pre-Columbian cultures.

But the Indians have also adopted many customs and beliefs that the Europeans brought to America. From social organization to music and dances, from festivals to religions, most practices—and even the native languages—have been profoundly affected by institutions and behaviors brought to America from Europe. Obviously, our population is not a homogeneous one, but mestizaje is irreversible. And because it represents the essence of modern culture, any attempt to slow it down is as useless as it is senseless.

Racists often attempt to cover up this reality. And racism is a human stupidity from which, I am sad to say, neither Anglo nor Latin America—nor any other part of the world—can be exonerated. Prejudice against the Indian, the black, and the Asian is expressed in a thousand ways, some blatant, some subtle, some crafty. One of its expressions is the quiet contempt for the mestizo condition. Since economic powers tend to be concentrated in the white minorities, and there are proportionally far too many Indians and African Americans in the most exploited and discriminated sectors of society, it has been commonplace to perceive racism strictly in terms of the rich discriminating against the poor. But this perception is inaccurate because racism, like mestizaje, can work both ways.

And racism has worked both ways in Latin America, especially among intellectuals. In the 1920s there was, in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, a polemic throughout Spanish America between "Indianists" and "Europeanists." It was a sorry example of reciprocal racism.

In the heat of the polemic, a distinguished Peruvian historian called for the destruction of all churches and paintings of the Spanish colonial period because he claimed they were foreign to the American reality. With this logic, he would have also called for the banning of the Spanish language with which he made his proposal. Or, for that matter, the English and Portuguese languages as well. And why not other objects and customs that were not around before the arrival of the Europeans, such as the wheel, writing, the horse, Christianity, and so on and so forth? To be consistent, he would have also called for the re-establishment of human sacrifice and of the Aztec rite whereby an emperor was buried with all of his advisers, his many wives, and his concubines.

Those who express dismay about the crimes and cruelties of the conquistadors against the Incas and Aztecs have good reason to feel solidarity with peoples who suffered in the past. They should, however, be equally outraged about the crimes and cruelties of Incas and Aztecs against the thousands of peoples they subjugated. But they are not. Academics have been itemizing every single crime committed by Europeans with remarkable meticulousness, but they have not shed a single tear for the thousands, for the hundreds of thousands, and perhaps millions of Indian men and women who were sacrificed in wars of conquest and in Inca, Maya, Aztec, Chicha, or Tolteca ceremonies re-sembling human barbecues. And yet I am sure that, at least in theory, they would agree that one cannot be selective about moral outrage. Cruelty must be condemned wherever we find it, and it is not fair to elicit sympathy for the victims of a subjugated culture while forgetting the cruelty for which it was also responsible.

I am not arguing against those who wish to remember the arrival of the Spaniards as a bloody period of history in which countless and inexcusable brutalities were committed. I do object, however, to the jump many have made from moral outrage about historical events to the utopian assumption, which sometimes becomes an explicit claim, that we must somehow re-establish pre-Columbian civilizations as the Europeans found them, as though it were possible to defy the course of history. It is a proposal that leads invariably to actions that make us recoil with horror, such as the atrocities of the Shining Path movement in Peru. I also find it unrealistic to forget that all Americans in the north and in the south, regardless of their color and origins, are products of this saga and its aftermath, for better or for worse.

However, I believe mostly for the better—because those hard, greedy, and sometimes fanatical men brought along to America not only a hunger for wealth, and the unforgiving cross, but also a culture that has been ours ever since. A culture that makes us heirs of Cervantes and of Shakespeare and Adam Smith no more and no less than an inhabitant of Madrid or London. A culture that introduced to human civilization those codes of politics and morality that allow us to condemn powerful nations that abuse the weak, to reject imperialism and colonialism, to stand up for human rights wherever they are violated. The first culture in human history to recognize the rights of our contemporaries and even the rights of our remote ancestors.

The ancient Americans would not have understood how someone could question the right of conquest. They would have found it difficult to figure out why men and women criticize their own nation and express solidarity with its victims in the manner of the great Bartolomé de las Casas, the priest who denounced Spanish brutalities against the Indians in the name of a universal morality superior to the interests of any individual, government, state, or nation.

Liberty, I believe, is the greatest contribution of the culture that created the sovereign individual, the owner of rights that other individuals and the state must respect at all times. The culture that gives liberty an unprecedented and primary role in all realms of life has attained its leading role in science and technology, and has produced an

abundance of wealth. Liberty, as historian Fernand Braudel has shown, is the driving force of economic and technological progress. The political expression of this culture is liberal democracy, the system which has prevailed over totalitarianism in a decisive way and which is slowly spreading its benefits throughout the world. With a few pathetic exceptions, democracy is today the system that Latin American nations have made their own.

To revive the absurd polemic between "Indianists" and "Europeanists" as happened during the Quincentenary commemoration is to set up a smoke-screen of pseudo-problems in front of problems that are truly pressing. I am referring not to the cruelties the native populations suffered 500 years ago but to the misery they continue to suffer today, when America is made up of independent republics. It is incumbent upon us to assume responsibility for the discrimination that exists today against cultural and ethnic minorities. This is not an historical debate, but a highly topical issue which will shape our future.

It is always a useful exercise to review the past with the eyes of the present in order to learn from error, but it is disingenuous to express horror and dismay for the crimes of conquest while forgetting that violence and exploitation continued. It worsened in countries such as Argentina, Chile, or the United States, where genocides of native populations occurred in the 19th century, and violence continues to occur under our very eyes in nations such as Guatemala, Brazil, and Peru, where struggles between terrorists and soldiers or between gold diggers and settlers have resulted in the mass murder of Indians. These are current and burning issues. The speculation about what would have happened in America if the Europeans had remained in Europe will not allay the misery and suffering of our day.

In fiction, which is my field, it is always possible to pretend that certain historical events did not take place, to project our fantasies into the past, to imagine utopias. But it is not possible or desirable to do that when coping with social and economic problems that are all too real. I must confess I have a hard time finding good answers to my own questions about archaic cultures in the modern world. As Karl Popper noted, people have an easier time identifying human misery than agreeing on the nature of ideal societies that would make everyone happy. I only know that it is not possible to resolve the issue with the impassioned statements or with the ideological stereotypes that invariably lead to counterproductive policies.

Why are indigenous cultures marginal after so many years? Why is their integration so slow? How can we promote their development and modernization? Is Westernization of indigenous peoples a crime, or is it the fastest way to overcome the backwardness and exploitation they are suffering today? Can these cultures become modern and overcome oppression while conserving what are essential or at least fundamental elements of their language, beliefs, and traditions? These are some of the problems I think should be considered instead of empty polemics that pretend 500 years of history can be forgotten, and that the people of America would be happier if the pre-Columbian world were re-established as it once existed.

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